

SERVICE OF WORSHIP
Puzzling Reflections

Let us worship God, let us pray:

Heavenly Father, we worship you now, acknowledging your greatness and delighting in your love.

We want to thank you God for all your blessings to us and we want to express our gratitude.

We confess our mistakes and recognise our weaknesses and seek your strength and forgiveness.

We seek to remember and pray for ourselves, for others and for our world in all its need.

We come to listen to what you have to say to us through Scripture, prayer and the inner promptings of your Holy Spirit.

Father God, accept our worship and help us, through it, to draw nearer to you.

This we ask in the name of Christ our Lord, Amen.

HYMN

O what a mystery I see
What marvellous design
That God should come as one of us
A Son in David's line
Flesh of our flesh, of woman born
Our humanness he owns
And for a world of wickedness
His guiltless blood atones

This perfect Man, incarnate God
By selfless sacrifice

Destroyed our sinful history
All fallen Adam's curse
In him the curse of blessing turns
My barren spirit flowers
As over the shattered power of sin
The cross of Jesus towers

By faith a child of his I stand
An heir in David's line
Royal descendant by his blood
Destined by Love's design
Fathers of faith, my fathers now!
Because in Christ I am
And all God's promises in Him
To me are 'Yes, Amen'!

No more then as a child of earth
Must I my lifetime spend - his history
His destiny are mine to apprehend
Oh what a Saviour, what a Lord
O Master, Brother, Friend!
What a miracle has joined me to
This life that never ends!

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SCRIPTURE READING

1 Corinthians 13:8-13 (New Living Translation)

8 Prophecy and speaking in unknown languages and special knowledge will become useless. But love will last forever! 9 Now our knowledge is partial and incomplete, and even the gift of prophecy reveals only part of the whole picture! 10 But when the time of perfection comes, these partial things will become useless.

11 When I was a child, I spoke and thought and reasoned as a child. But when I grew up, I put away childish things. **12 Now we see things imperfectly, like puzzling reflections in a mirror, but then we will see everything with perfect clarity. All that I know now is partial and incomplete, but then I will know everything completely, just as God now knows me completely.**

13 Three things will last forever—faith, hope, and love—and the greatest of these is love.

MESSAGE

We humans are clever and ingenious. We know a lot and we can accomplish a lot- more and more every day in fact. However, we don't know everything and we certainly can't do everything. I sometimes feel we humans get quite a shock, quite a fright, when we realise how weak and ineffectual we are in certain circumstances. For example, we have not overcome the scourge of cancer, or of TB, or of AIDS, or of malaria. We can seemingly do very little to halt the increase in global warming. How ironic it is that modern technology and industrialisation can increase the effects of global warming but cannot reverse them.

In his 1898 novel *War of the Worlds*, H. G. Wells tells the story of Martians travelling to Earth with the intention of wiping out the human race and making the Earth their home. Despite the fact that the Martians had "*intelligence greater than man's*" they are, in the end, "*slain by the putrefactive and disease bacteria against which their systems were unprepared*". Does this remind you of our current predicament as humans? Though we have made great scientific and technological advances (including putting men on the moon and sending probes to Mars!) the whole world has been laid low by one of the simplest organisms of all- a virus!!

Our ability and our knowledge, as the Apostle Paul reminds us, is partial-like a puzzling reflection in a mirror. The word in Greek is 'enigma', meaning a riddle, obscure, elusive, puzzling. We should remember the imperfect metal surfaces which formed the mirrors in the days when the Apostle Paul was writing and we can imagine how imperfect and enigmatical the image would appear. Therefore, what the Apostle Paul was saying to the readers of his letter was like the image you see when you look in the mirror, with its blurred and undefined outline, such is our knowledge here and now.

Our knowledge of God is limited. When the Apostle Paul was in Athens he came across an altar ‘to an unknown god’ *Agnostos Theos* (Acts 17:23). ‘Agnostic’ means ‘not knowing’ and in its weakest sense the term agnostic means our inability to know certain aspects of the mysterious God.

So much about God is a mystery. As the Apostle Paul writes in his letter to the Romans: “*No one can explain the things God decides or understand his ways*” (11:33. See also Isaiah 40:13). Gregory of Nazianzus, one of the great figures in Christian history, said: “*It is difficult to conceive of God, but to define him in words is an impossibility....it is impossible to express him, and yet more impossible to conceive him*”.

I think it is so important to remember this. We must not be so presumptuous as to speak as if we can know the mind and the will of God. The French mathematician, physicist and theologian, Blaise Pascal, said: “*I am astonished at the boldness with which people undertake to speak about God*”. Cecil Day-Lewis, in his poem ‘The Magnetic Mountain’, mocks those who are conceited enough to think that they can fathom God:

*‘God is a proposition
And we that prove him are his priests,
His chosen.
From bare hypothesis
Of strata and wind, of stars and tides,
Watch me construct his universe,
A working model of my majestic notions,
A sum done in the head.
Last week I measured the light,
His little finger;
The rest is a matter of time’.*

We must always remember that God’s ways are not our ways and his thoughts are not our thoughts (Isaiah 55:8). The majesty and mystery of God can never be encapsulated by any human system of thought. As St. Augustine put it: ‘*Si comprehendis non est Deus*’ - anything which the intellect is able to comprehend is too small to be God.

When we remember that so much about God is a mystery, it fosters a feeling of humility before the Divine and helps to guard against

fundamentalism in our dealings with others. This is so important, because as Rev. Henry Sloane Coffin pithily put it: *“People never do evil so cheerfully as when they do it from absolute conviction”*.

So far, we have said that we can never completely know the mind of God and fathom his deepest mysteries. However, saying that we can't know everything about God is not the same as saying that we can know nothing about God.

God reveals himself supremely to us in and through his Son Jesus Christ. In John's Gospel we read: *“No one has ever seen God. But [the Son] ...has shown us what he is like”*. Jesus himself said: *“Whoever has seen me has seen the Father”* (John 14:9) (see also Luke 10:22). In Colossians we read: *“For in him [Jesus] the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily”* (2:9).

God reveals himself in the pages of the Bible and through the Church. Often, God reveals himself through the experiences people have. H. G. Wells once said: *“At times in the silence of the night and in rare, lonely moments, I experience a sort of communion of myself with Something Great that is not myself”*.

The late Dr. Lesley Weatherhead was a very popular Methodist preacher and author. He told of the time he had a supernatural experience which convinced him of the reality of God. He was 19 years of age at the time and a theological student travelling on a train one November Saturday evening, from Richmond Theological College to a church where he was going to take the service: *“For a few seconds only”* he wrote later, *“the whole compartment was filled with light....I felt caught up into some tremendous sense of being within a loving, triumphant and shining purpose. I never felt more humble. I never felt more exalted”*.

Some of you might say that you have never had such an experience; that you have never felt a powerful sense of God's presence. Many people say that they have more questions than answers when it comes to matters of faith and belief and that they have many doubts and uncertainties regarding religion. Rev. Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick once wrote: *“Most of*

my life I have lived in the woods, but there has always been a piece of cleared ground in the woods. As I've grown older the piece of cleared ground has grown larger. In my preaching I've always preached out of the cleared ground and not out of the woods".

This is Harry Emerson Fosdick's way of saying that during his life he had faced doubts and uncertainties regarding faith and the nature of belief. However, in his preaching and in his life, he didn't focus on those doubts, he focused instead on those things that he was certain of.

As Christian men and women we need to believe that there is a loving God who cares for us individually; that in a unique way Jesus reveals God to us, showing us what God is like and what he expects of us; that the life and teaching of Jesus show how we can live lives that are pleasing to God and which are compassionate and loving towards people; and that the existence of the Church is a miracle which proves that Jesus Christ is our risen Saviour and the Son of God. These are the beliefs we need to cling to. They will hold us firm should the storms of doubt ever assail us.

In his poem 'The Eternal Goodness', the great American Quaker poet John Greenleaf Whittier captures wonderfully the balance that exists within many thinking believers, to a greater or lesser degree, between what we know and what we don't know when it comes to faith and belief and God:

*'I know not where His islands lift
Their fronded palms in air;
I only know I cannot drift
Beyond His love and care'.*

Most Christians live with questions and uncertainties when it comes to their faith and what they believe. This is perhaps understandable, for as the Apostle Paul tells us, at present, in this life, we see only puzzling reflections in a mirror; our knowledge is partial. But one day we will see God face to face and then our knowledge will be whole, just like God's knowledge of us. Amen.

PRAYER

Almighty God and Heavenly Father, we worship you with wonder, awe and gladness.

You are far greater than anything we can imagine, and yet you revealed yourself to us in your Son, Jesus Christ. You are higher than our highest thoughts, and yet you are always close by our sides. You are more powerful than we realise sometimes, at work in the lives of empires and nations, and yet you care for each one of us individually as a parent cares for a child.

Even when we stretch our imagination to the very limit we are only scratching the surface of how wonderful you are. We can worship you for a lifetime and even then we will only have begun to fathom the depth of your love.

Help us to truly praise you not just with words but in our thoughts and our hearts and our lives. In this way, may we offer you the sincerest expression of our praise: lives of faithful discipleship, a love for you and for others, and a living commitment to Jesus Christ.

Almighty God, give us the humility to acknowledge that beside your greatness our weakness only becomes more apparent. Give us complete faith and trust in you, despite our uncertainties and our blindness to your glory. Give us joy and hope through knowing you, despite the limit of our understanding. Give us confidence in serving you, believing that you are a God who is vast in your might and mystery, and yet a God who is also close to us in your love and grace.

This we ask through Christ our Lord. Amen

Our Father, who art in heaven....

HYMN

1 Christ is made the sure foundation,
Christ the head and corner-stone,
chosen of the Lord and precious,
binding all the Church in one;

holy Zion's help for ever,
and her confidence alone.

2 All that dedicated city,
dearly loved of God on high,
in exultant jubilation
pours perpetual melody;
God the One in Three adoring
in glad hymns eternally.

3 To this temple, where we call thee,
come, O Lord of hosts, today:
with thy wonted loving-kindness
hear thy people as they pray;
and thy fullest benediction
shed within its walls always.

4 Here vouchsafe to all thy servants
what they ask of thee to gain,
what they gain from thee forever
with the blessed to retain,
and hereafter in thy glory
evermore with thee to reign.

5 Laud and honour to the Father,
laud and honour to the Son,
laud and honour to the Spirit,
ever Three and ever One,
One in might, and One in glory,
while unending ages run.

BLESSING

May the blessings of God rest upon his people in every land and of every tongue. May God comfort all who need him and meet in mercy all who seek him.

And may the blessings of God Almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, remain with us and all of his people, now and for ever. Amen.
